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Policy Energy and Public Management Networks

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Public management networks are fixtures of contemporary governance. They play an important role in planning for and delivering public goods and services. However, public management networks do not always possess the capacity to convert collective solutions to formal policy or program adjustments. Despite the very broad range of activities in them, the ability of networks to create this "policy energy" is limited. Government or other powerful agencies can often dominate the management of networks, elected officials may make policy decisions that are inconsistent with the recommended action of networks, and assessing the performance of networks is very often a moving target. This article discusses these and other types of administrative and political barriers that can hinder the ability of public management networks to influence policy making and implementation.

Keywords: Public management networks, network limitations.

1. Introduction

The scope of attention given to managing networks has increased over the past few decades. As more practitioners work across organizational boundaries (Kettl, 2006), more scholars have focused their attention to networks by developing frameworks for managing network processes (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006; Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2012; McGuire, 2002; Purdy, 2012; Rethemeyer & Hatmaker, 2008). The underlying assumption of these frameworks is that management enables multiple organizational representatives to create multi-agency solutions to public problems and to achieve the collective goal(s) of the network. Policy design and implementation are portrayed merely as direct products of effective network administration. While such atmospheres do prevail sometimes, the opposite also exists in network operations: "acrimony, power determination, disagreement over problems and aims, impossibility in reaching agreement, and lack of implementation ability" (McGuire & Agranoff, 2011, p. 266). These obstacles are rarely discussed in the network and collaboration literatures (Vangen & Huxham, 2014).

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The types of networks portrayed in these and other frameworks are what we refer to as "public management networks," which include agencies involved in public policy making and administrative structures through which public goods and services are planned, designed, produced, and delivered (and any or all of the activities). Such networks are typically intersectoral, intergovernmental, and based functionally in a specific policy or policy area. That is, officials from government organizations and agencies at federal, state, and local levels operate in structures of exchange and production with representatives from profit-making and not-for-profit organizations.

We differentiate between public management networks and social networks. The former are goal-directed, whereas the latter are serendipitous networks comprised of individuals who happen to connect. Social networks are not managed in the sense that direction is applied to structuring and guiding the relationships. Social networks do include specific, but sometimes unintentional, patterns of connectivity (Cross & Parker, 2004). These social networks in the workplace, for example, can be important mechanisms for improving managerial decisions and they are not devoid of goals, but they "do not need to be governed as a whole, since they do not aim to achieve a preconceived shared objective" (Saz-Carranza, 2012, p. 7). The public management networks discussed here are governed to some degree by network members.

While recent studies elucidate the types of managerial skills that are (or can be) utilized in network settings, there has not been enough focus on the problem of whether all public management networks are strong enough to make a substantive difference in determining the design and outcomes of public policy. Take, for example, the U.S. National Rural Development Partnership (NRDP) that was created in 1990. NRDP was a collaborative effort involving representatives from all three levels of governments, tribal governments, the private sector, and the nonprofit sector to promote rural development across the nation. The primary vehicles through which the partnership sought to achieve its goals were State Rural Development Councils (SRDCs). These state-level councils, still in existence today in a handful of states, are designed to advance rural interests through collaboration, partnerships, and helping rural communities to access resources they need to accomplish their community-level goals, and are responsible for creating their own mission, structure, and operating guidelines, and implementing action plans. The ability of these public management networks to affect change on a regional or national level, however, was constrained by governor's offices, state economic development agencies, state legislatures, and the state-based offices of the largest funder, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Radin et al., 1996). Federal funding for the SRDCs was eliminated within the last decade for most of the 40 councils and those that remain are funded largely through foundation grants. While heralded in the 1990s as one response to the problems of rural communities, these substantive policy barriers were not easily overcome by street-level, network action. The network system of tribes, community providers, industry associations, and state and local implementers could not turn around this reluctance to continue the program. There are other examples of the limitations of public management networks in Spain (Blanco & Goma, 2002), the United Kingdom (Newman, 2005; Rhodes, 1997), cities in the Midwestern

United States (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003), and Scotland (Huxham & Vangen, 2005), but these studies are often outnumbered by the rosier frameworks dotting the public management research landscape.

Our central argument is that network deliberations and the solutions networks propose for implementing policies often fail to replace government decisions, even when implementation is shared with government agencies. As a blocking force, agency (non-network) power is very real when lead organizations, often government agencies, serve to keep certain problems off the agenda, withhold support for key network strategies or decisions, or withhold required agency-controlled resources (McGuire & Agranoff, 2011). In these situations, public management networks may have low capacity for policy (formulation and/or implementation) influence or policy change, which constitutes low levels of what we call policy "energy." Policy energy refers to *the capacity of any organization, agency, or other structural arrangement (in this case, public management networks) to affect the design and outcomes of a public policy or program.* Too often, networks devise reasonable solutions, but then run into administrative and political barriers that prevent the next action steps. And public management networks rarely have the legitimate authority to enforce compliance with their own preferred solutions. As O'Toole (1997) argues, administrators working within networks "should not assume that they possess authority" (p. 48). When managing networks, goals can be shared, objectives can be achieved, and solutions can be offered, but the government agency's representative(s), even if s/he is a member of the network, usually makes the final policy decision. Lacking policy energy, public management networks will *recommend* action more than they *decide* policy. This article focuses on the administrative and political barriers that public management networks face in trying to generate policy energy.

2. Administrative Barriers to Generating Policy Energy

Much has been learned by scholars who have investigated the activities of public management networks. The "black box" of the workings of such networks is becoming clearer, or at least less muddled. For example, research indicates that governing authority in public management networks is not always conferred or assigned to a single government or non-governmental agency (Weber & Khademian, 2008). More than one manager or leader may exist in a single network, and that managerial or leadership role may not be defined as clearly as that of a supervisor in hierarchical organizations. Also, scholars acknowledge that public management networks are governed largely by network members' ability to facilitate collaboration through relational skills such as patience, empathy, honesty, and deference (Vangen & Huxham, 2003). Administrative tasks such as motivating network members, creating trust, treating others as equals, maintaining a close knit group, sharing information freely amongst networks members, and other people-oriented behaviors are important to ensure network effectiveness (Silvia & McGuire, 2010). Research also suggests that the typical network member (or manager) operates in multiple networks. Although a "home" network may be the primary responsibility of a manager(s), other public management networks intersect or are adjacent to the home network, resulting in a system of networks that can lead to overlapping responsibilities and roles for network members (Rethemeyer & Hatmaker, 2008).

The black box of networks also contains the ingredients for administrative obstacles to generating policy energy. One such obstacle can be found in the different, sometimes conflicting methods for a manager to facilitate network activity. Milward and Provan (2006) build a framework based on the idea that there may be a designated, legitimate steerer *of* the network, but there may also be managers *in* the network, who can have split missions and sometimes split loyalties. This distinction between steerers and managers is consistent with the ideas proposed by those who differentiate between governance of a network (exercising control, regulation, inducement, incentive or persuasive influence over the whole network), and management within a network (activities carried out by individuals who are themselves actors in the network) (6, Goodwin, Peck, & Freeman, 2006). The role of a manager "is not given *a priori* to one actor" (Koppenjan & Klijn, 2004, p. 11). Network management can be undertaken by several actors, with managerial activities sometimes conducted simultaneously by more than one actor. Since network members represent the values and preferences of their home agencies as well as those of the network, the members can be placed in a conundrum: Managers may have to choose between serving their individual agencies' missions and the mission of the network (Thomson & Perry, 2006). Additionally, few government agency administrators work full-time in networks. With the exception of certain "boundary spanners" who work full time to fulfill cross-agency tasks (LeRoux, 2014), many administrators spend as little as 15 to 20 percent of their total time in collaborative activities, including participating in networks (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003). There actually is little time for a public management network to develop policy energy due to the other overwhelming demands on network members.

There are situations in which the different managers in the network enact their roles differently. One network member might approach the role as a facilitator who is willing and able to move the collaborative agenda forward by allowing all members to have a voice and seeking consensus. Others may depend on "collaborative thuggery," which is perhaps a more pragmatic but less relational approach to managing networks that generally is not consistent with the spirit of collaboration (Vangen & Huxham, 2003). Reconciling these dual roles is not easy, and leads to public management networks trying to ameliorate conflicting agendas rather than advancing the effective design and implementation of policy. Policy energy is thus sapped by managerial conflict.

The process of addressing such internal conflict results in little time for exerting effort into managing external stakeholders. These external stakeholders, whose support is needed to formulate and implement policy (Silvia, 2011), and therefore generate policy energy, include the recipients of the services provided by the network, the home agency that the members of the network represent, as well as those home agencies' stakeholders. Perhaps most important, the stakeholders who are rarely touched by managerial activity are elected officials and top agency leaders. Internal relationships can trump the maintenance of external relationships, making it difficult to cope with the power of external forces such as key agencies, critical policymakers, and other important "movers" in the policy world (McGuire & Agranoff, 2011).

While in the midst of moving the collaboration agenda forward, there are processing costs that can overwhelm public management networks. Network participants are concerned about the time and opportunity costs taken away from the management of their home organization (Agranoff, 2007). Graddy and Chen (2006) point to the transaction costs involved in network-based decision making. Many hours are spent in task forces or work groups that occur outside of the more formal partner meetings, resulting in a type of "collaborative inertia" that is marked by sluggish progress, lack of achievements, and sometimes network collapse (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). Even when this inertia is somehow overcome, it nevertheless comes at the expense of prolonged consensus building and relationship management. Such relationship management is often in a state of flux, requiring the "constant interplay between process design and process management' (Edelenbos & Klijn, 2006, p. 426), and resulting in hyperactivity and inefficient overprocessing.

3. Political Barriers to Generating Policy Energy

How do political barriers and power imbalances prevent public management networks from influencing the design and outcomes of public policy? It has become a truism in research that power and influence may be unequally distributed in networks (McGuire, 2011). The more power possessed by an organization (or the organization's representative), the more influence it has to determine the nature of the interorganizational exchange (Cook, 1977). A scholarly focus on management based in consensus building and relationship management masks the potential for coercive behavior in networks. The more powerful members of the network can shape network activities through such means as controlling the agenda and even withholding needed policy making resources (e.g. finances, human capital, political support, information, expertise). Powerful members can resist collaboration because of their concerns for protecting their agencies' "turf," whereby they defend against other network members encroaching on their autonomy.

Power imbalances also can exist in networks because some organizations or even a single organization bring to the network an inordinate amount of resources; thus the organization's representative is able to exert undue influence over the other network members. Such power asymmetries suggest "the inevitability that some partners will be more central to the enactment of the collaborative agenda than are others . . ." (Vangen & Huxham, 2014, p. 58). These network partners may be in opportunistic positions (Burt, 2009) that create unequal opportunity among network members, while others may be less willing or able members of a network. It is also true that in addition to experiencing power asymmetries, power can be and often is redistributed within the network over time. Gray (1989) acknowledges that at least a temporary redistribution of power occurs regularly in collaborative settings. In these situations, the design of public policy can be dominated either by a single network member or by members whose policy influence waxes and wanes.

Powerful governmental actors shape and determine public policy outcomes through the instrumental use of networks (Klijn & Skelcher, 2007). One example of this can be found in the increasing use—or misuse—of performance measures, which are often determined by political considerations (Radin, 2006). As Koliba (2014) argues regarding networks, "[q]uestions of performance are eminently informed by who has power" (p. 88). Various stakeholders involved in the network evaluate its effectiveness using multiple and sometimes conflicting criteria, and different constituencies expect different outcomes. These constituents are principals "who monitor and fund the network; agents, who work in the networks both as administrators and service-level professionals; and clients, who actually receive the services provided by the network" (Provan & Milward, 2001, p. 416). The relationships between principals, agents, and clients, result in differing assessments of effectiveness by the community, the network itself, and the organizations that are part of the network.

In addition to the potentially conflicting assessments of performance by various stakeholders, network objectives vary over time, thus making it difficult to establish a consistent and clear policy goal. Public management networks themselves can be so complex that their impact on performance is somewhat unpredictable for all involved (O'Toole, 1997), so evaluating a network's performance based on *ex ante* objectives is often unrealistic (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000). Public management networks have no central, coordinating actor to design and monitor goals, therefore measures based in goal achievement are less applicable. Because of the various stakeholders involved, it is a challenge just to determine whose objectives or perspectives should be prioritized when trying to evaluate network performance. If certain parties do not participate in the interaction process, the chances are high that their interests and preferences will not be represented in any network-derived solution. Even when a representative of an agency is supportive of a network solution, it does not mean that the entire agency and its sponsors/funders will be supportive. The ability of public management networks to create policy energy is limited when a policy outcome is a continuously moving target.

Networks have not eclipsed the centrality of government agencies in designing and implementing public policy, which is another reason why networks are limited in generating policy energy. Even in public management networks comprised of representatives from many different organizations and across sectors, it is the network member(s) from government agencies who often pull the various governmental and non-governmental forces together and distribute power and responsibilities; it is also the focus of political identity and the main instrument of political legitimacy (Hirst, 2000). A public organization is created by law to serve a particular purpose, whereas many public management networks are cooperative ventures whose members must continually work to convince their stakeholders that their work in the larger network is valuable and worthwhile (Milward & Provan, 2006). There still are legal mandates and financial resources that government agencies control, and the legitimacy that government participation brings to the network is sometimes necessary to garner and maintain the support of both network members and external stakeholders. For these reasons, the predominant nature of the government agency can virtually overlay or even overshadow the operations of networks, which is perhaps the ultimate political barrier to creating policy energy (McGuire & Agranoff, 2010).

4. Conclusion

We have argued that some public management networks lack substantial levels of *policy energy*. Government agencies are changing to accommodate collaborative, networked activity as their representatives increasingly work with organizations external to the agency, but networks still face administrative and political obstacles that constrain their capacity to make policy changes and program adjustments. A government manager may be convinced that s/he knows best and seek to control network processes and performance, which results in the network as a whole possessing only minimal influence on the policy process. The transaction costs of managing public management networks can be high and sometimes insurmountable due to the multiple and conflicting agendas with which each network member must contend. Performance measures for networked programs can be "gamed" and external political considerations of the effectiveness of networks can trump the demands of managing the internal processes of networks. These obstacles are not easy to overcome.

We do not wish to overstate the argument. Public management networks are far from powerless and they certainly can, and do, influence the design and outcomes of public policy. The increase of research on public management networks confirms their prevalence and relevance to public management in general. Rarely, however, is there an acknowledgement by researchers that there are limitations to public management networks, particularly in their capacity for generating policy energy. Scholars should turn their attention to understanding this important phenomenon.

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